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ABSTRACT

While primarily discussing the relationship between school boards and superintendents, the speaker makes four main points. First, the professional administration that runs our schools, led by superintendents and their management teams, is in the best position--perhaps the only position--to implement improvements in education. Second, school boards (and the individual members who make up the boards), as now designed, are more likely to impede than to implement change. Third, teacher unions are politically unable and, of necessity, too self-serving to bring about internal reform. Fourth, parents and student groups do not possess professional judgment and without an effective, innovative, and aggressive school administration to implement their concerns cannot bring about the kinds of reform required to make our system of education work. The speaker proposes action that would strengthen the role of the superintendent, more carefully define the board's role as policy-maker, and change the current model of school governance. (Author/IRT)

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
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Summary of Remarks:

The Mayor of New Orleans, Moon Landrieu, recently told a story that dramatizes very well the predicament that public school administrators are in today.

A third baseman was, throughout a baseball game, the brunt of angry remarks from one particular fan. Finally, fed up with the insults, the third baseman left the field, tossing his glove to the fan, saying "Here, you play the position. You seem to know how to do a better job."

The fan accepted his challenge and in the next inning he took the third baseman's place. The first man up to bat hit a line drive out toward our feisty neophyte third baseman, but it came at him with such unaccustomed force that he winced and missed it completely. The batter made it to second base by the time the outfielder could recover the ball. The second man up hit an easy grounder directly in the path of the third base, but it caught in the webbing of the neophyte's glove and the man on second advanced to third. Now, with the two men on, the next batter popped a fly ball right to the third base, but the sun was in his eyes and he failed to catch it. All three men scored, at which point the amateur threw down his glove and left the field. As he passed the dugout, the third baseman smugly asked, "What'sa madder, fella; don't ya' know how to play third base." Whereupon, the fan replied, "Well, you've got the position so fouled up, nobody can play it."

To be sure, the position of superintendent of public education is a fouled up position - for many reasons, only a few of which are understood by our fans, but in my opinion it is still a position that can be played and played so that we can make our schools work for the millions of youngsters who are our real constituents. In my remarks today, I want to zero in on two reasons why I believe our system of education isn't working as it should.

Let me begin with a sentence that Neil Sullivan wrote for the Saturday Review back in 1972. His answer to that question -- why isn't our system of education working -- is the foundation of my remarks:

> "Because elected and appointed lay school boards cannot keep out of administration; because many superintendents are completely inept and unable to provide leadership; because the school boards nearly everywhere make policy decisions in areas in which they are completely unqualified; because many board members are worn out before they arrive at meetings and then are physically and emotionally unable to cope with problems at hand; and because many board members use their positions to win higher official office."[1]

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Much of what's wrong in education today can be traced directly to school boards and the conditions under which the superintendents they hire work. Creating conditions for effective administration -- a concept I will elaborate on later in my speech -- is the key ingredient in creating schools that work. When present, good things happen throughout the schools, when absent, good things can happen, but they will happen in spite of the system and only in limited isolated cases. The baseball fan is, in part, right -- the positions of school administration and school board need improvement without which even the most astute administrator or board member will have trouble.

In the next 40 minutes, I will suggest to you that:

(1) the professional administration that runs our schools, led by superintendents and their management teams are in the best position -- perhaps the only position to implement improvements in education;

(2) school boards (and the individual members who comprise boards) as now designed, are more likely to impede than to implement change;

(3) teachers unions are politically unable and of necessity, too self-serving to bring about internal reform;

(4) parent and student groups do not possess professional judgment, and without an effective, innovative and aggressive school administration to implement their concerns, cannot bring about the kinds of reform required to make our system of education work.

Let's talk about ourselves first. It is imperative that the position of chief executive be stable enough to allow the individual time to bring his leadership to bear on a system. He or she must have time to build a stable management team -- a concept which I believe is the best one to implement change in any school system. It takes time to build such a team and develop cooperation and trust at all levels of administration. The facts are, however, that most superintendents will never be allowed use of that important management tool - time. In far too many communities the position of superintendent is unstable and susceptible to changing membership and mode of school boards.

The best index of the tensions and vulnerability of the superintendency is the high turnover rate. For the six-year period beginning in the spring of 1969 and ending in the fall of 1975, twenty of our major city school systems averaged three different superintendents. That's a tenure average of two years per person!! From the roster of the 27 members of the Council of Great Cities Schools, only three systems have retained the same superintendent in that six-year period. When the superintendents of the 100,000-300,000 population group were planning a forthcoming meeting in the Western Section of our nation, out of the five dozen superintendents present, none would volunteer to host the meeting. Reportedly, none was sure he would still be superintendent in his district by the time the meeting occurred, and this pattern of vulnerability exists throughout the nation in every size district.

No major institution can progress -- indeed survive -- without continuity. The ability to translate goals into operation assumes that there will be an administration that is both effective and consistent over a reasonable period of time. This current, unprecedented high turnover of top management is a seriously debilitating factor. It inevitably results in an atmosphere of uncertainty among the remaining administrative staff whose reaction to the uncertainty is fierce protection of the status quo. Middle management sees itself as the group that must keep things running. However understandable this reaction is, the result is a stagnating, uninspiring influence on the system. (It need not be like that.)

Middle management always plays an important part in the total school operation, and it can be one of innovation and aggressive pressure for better schools. To be this, however, it must see its future in terms of the goals being set for the system by a stable top management. It is only reasonable to expect that middle management -- principals, supervisors, consultants -- will take daring leaps forward only if they can feel secure that the superintendent will be around next year and the year after, to support them, encourage them, fight for them! Without more stability at the top, it is unrealistic to expect those further down the line to respond to top leadership.

They are what might be called, a tenured professional bureaucracy. They comprise the long-established formal and informal groups within any system. They follow the written and unwritten procedures by which things have always been done. They form the associations, alliances and loyalties that people who work together invariably form. Any reform attempts by the top management must take this fact into account.

Bureaucracy -- almost always used pejoratively -- is a much maligned work, but ought not to be. Mitchell Katz, in his book Class Bureaucracy in the Schools, asks the question "Why did bureaucracy triumph over all of the other organizational models that might have evolved throughout America's educational history?"[2] His answer is that to accomplish a complicated and massive social task, such as the public education of all citizens, there is no other way of proceeding. "Bureaucracy," he states, "is neither good nor bad in this point of view. It is a social fact -- a necessity. If we want schools, hospitals, welfare or manufactured goods, we must have it, for the alternative is chaos and anarchy...It is better" says Katz, "to accept the reality and the permanency of bureaucracy and to improve its operation."[3]

For us, in our considerations today, the question is certainly not how to do away with the professional bureaucracy, the educational administrators. Our concern instead is how to make them more responsive and self-renewing. One problem lies in the vulnerability of top management, as already noted; the other problem lies in the longevity of middle management. By virtue of their tenure, middle management is all too often stolid, resistant and reactionary. I suggest that middle management positions must be made more dependent on the success of the entire management group. Therefore all administrators should be placed on contract instead of tenure, and their appointment dependent on the recommendations of the superintendent. The superintendent cannot be held responsible for the actions of a staff over which he has no control. Persuasion or coercion are poor substitutes for leadership and loyalty. A contracted management would tend to insure greater support and loyalty at all levels of the administration. I see removal from tenure protection as one means of increasing the responsiveness of the entire management group - both to the superintendent and the community.

Since in many states tenure is still a way of life, a less threatening means of achieving that much needed responsiveness would be to make every segment of management part of a management team.

The management team functions at district level by insuring that all segments of management, including principals, supervisors, consultants, assistant superintendents, deputy superintendents -- all those who make administrative decisions that affect the operation of the system -- are represented in every major committee. They are part of the superintendent's cabinet, the negotiating team, the salary schedule committee, the top management meetings. Because decisions are best made when information from those closest to the point of implementation are part of the decision-making process, these management members must be brought into the team. One way or another, those who make up what I have called the professional bureaucracy must respond to the superintendent's leadership. Without their cooperation, no call for action will result in implementation.

Bureaucracies, as a means of self-preservation, are masterful at ignoring decisions, especially those which they view as threatening. Unless they are part of the decision-making process and see their future tied to the success of the superintendent and top management, they will not become committed to new courses of action.

So the team concept is not only the best way to get information which is integral to good decisions, it is the best way to insure that decisions will become reality.

Dr. Lester Anderson of the University of Michigan describes the management team as one that must involve an understanding, shared by all, that it is a team -- that no one segment will act to affect changes or that will impact upon another section without their knowledge and without having the opportunity of sharing the expertise that each section has to contribute to the entire team.[4]

Rensis Likert, in his book "The Interdependent, Interacting Character of Effective Organizations" speaks from industry's point of view where the management team model originates. He cautions that while decisions are made through consultation among all members of the management team, once a decision has been made, the superior is held "full responsible for the quality of all decisions and for their implementation."[5] This is not decision-by-consensus. It is a process by which the leader makes the decision and is responsible for that decision which is based on the widest possible source of information -- information that comes from those most affected by the decision. This is how an effective management team can create schools that work.

An important concept in the management team model is decentralization -- bringing this decision-making process down to the level closest to the student. In other words, the management team does not exist only at district levels, leaving each principal free to run his or her own little fiefdom. No, I am talking about the team concept permeating the entire administrative operation of a school system including the building level. A principal must include in his team all those affected by his decisions -- the teachers, the union, the students and the community. They too must have representation in decisions for the same reason that the superintendent includes all segments of management under him -- it is the best way to make good decisions and it is the only way to insure they will be implemented. Decrees from on high are no more acceptable at the building level than they are at the system level. And like the superintendent -- the principal will be held responsible for the quality of his decision.

To reach a "quality" decision, the principal must be aware of information and concerns that students, parents and teachers possess. He must also learn to negotiate with the teachers' building committees and/or parent groups. To make any cooperative effort work, one must acquire skills of listening and negotiating, for we do not want principals absolving themselves of responsible professional judgments in the face of demands from special interest groups. Clearly, the superintendent and board have a responsibility to help middle management gain these skills by providing in-house workshops and training sessions at board expense.

On the subject of public involvement, let me be sure I am understood. I stated earlier that parents cannot reform our schools. I am definately opposed to the currently popular but dangerous idea of de-professionalizing schools -- turning them over to amateurs to run.

I believe community groups do not have the professional expertise required to improve our schools. Martin Schiff's article, recently published in Phi Delta Kappa, in which he assesses the value and mistakes of New York City's community-controlled schools, expresses what I mean when I talk about the dangers of de-professionalizing schools: He says: "Completely overlooked in such rhetoric (about community control) is the matter of socioeconomic class and whether a community controlled by lower-class, anti-intellectual elements can promote better education."[6]

In my opinion, school administrators and school boards who allow themselves to be intimidated into turning over classrooms to pressure groups are irresponsible and negligent. The good administrator listens to his community and balances their desires with his own professional judgment. Without that balance, community involvement, local control -- by whatever name you know it - can become petty parochialism, and educationally counter-productive.

We must not, as a profession, allow ourselves to be talked into "deschooling" society to the point where there are no professionals. Al Shanker, quite correctly, I believe, talks about how the function of education cannot proceed under those circumstances any more than a hospital could function if everyone in the community decided to come to participate, and tell the doctors what to do. The "town meeting" model is not one that operates our schools in a manner of continuing improvement.

What I'm proposing is public involvement that is organized with limits as well as opportunities, both of which are understood by all parties. In New Orleans, these groups are sponsored by a Rockefeller Foundation Community Development grant. Participants are taught to negotiate at the local school level for changes in their schools that bring about conditions which will improve education for their children. They are involved in the selection of new administrators for their area, they have participatory opportunities in budget development, building construction plans and policy making. Also, sponsored by the Rockefeller grant is a middle management inservice training program which teaches principals to negotiate with their various publics -- it teaches skills of listening, of encouraging participation and of making judgments that are at once responsive and professionally sound. It teaches them how to operate a management team in their individual schools.

But teacher, student and community input and management teams operating at all levels throughout the system is an unlikely event in the reality of constantly changing superintendencies. Teachers organizations gain more power with each change in executive leadership at the top, community input flounders and withers away, and middle management seeks to preserve its own exposed extremities. Constant disruption at top levels brings about entrenchment and resistance to change. It's a natural reaction to instability.

As I noted at the beginning of this speech, much of this problem of disruption and instability should be laid at the feet of school boards. While most board members are truly interested in public education, the structural problems inherent in school boards are frequently insurmountable. Other sources of disruption and instability are caused by banner-carrying individual board members who have political ambitions, a personal ax to grind or believe they are correct in representing the desires of a particular segment of their community above all other segments (and what we really may need protection from are the well-meaning amateurs). But before elaborating on the problems of the individual members, let me talk about some flaws in the present board structure.

The election or appointment structure by which our boards are organized create the "revolving door syndrome," where members leave and are replaced by new ones who therefore did not participate in the hiring of the system's chief executive. The rapid turnover of board members is a trend, that I feel, started in the 60's and is continuing. A superintendent's board support can evaporate and he may find himself undercut on every administrative decision. The result is chaos and the prime victims are inevitably the pupils, but the superintendent suffers too. He took the position under one set of rules and is now forced by a new board to play by another. No wonder the professional administration he inherited is reluctant to join his team!

Another flaw is the problem of the newly elected member who comes into the board with what Philip Jones, associate editor of The National School Board Journal has called "only a limited understanding of his duties as a board member, the role of a board of education today, and -- perhaps most importantly -- of the consequences of his actions on the board..."[7] This problem results in fragmented board direction and poor support of the executive they hired to run their schools.

Another dangerous development that is becoming increasingly popular is the hiring of paid informants called school board staffers -- people hired to work exclusively for the boar board or individual members of the board. To my mind, this represents a total breakdown of the board's role as a policy-setting body and what may be worse, indivates a lack of trust between the board and superintendent. If they correctly believe that their superintendent is not dealing with them in a straightforward manner, then the answer is not to hire their own paid investigators, but to hire a superintendent with whom they have rapport and mutual respect. No system can be well-governed in the absence of trust and good communication between the board and superintendent.

This relationship is particularly valid during collective bargaining when the strength of a school system's management is critical. If the board does not support its administration and instead takes a neutral or mediating position between the administrator and the union, they will be exploited ruthlessly by the union to whom such a position appears as weakness and division among their opponent's ranks.

In fact, the phenomena of collective bargaining offers insight into the frailties of our long accepted concept of the law school board. Nowhere is the incompetence of the amateur more clearly seen and more potentially dangerous than in the delicate arena of collective bargaining. Faced with professional teacher negotiators who have been trained in the art of bargaining sessions arguing over demands and counter proposals, the lay board is inevitably at a disadvantage. Rather than recognize their vulnerability and develop management capability, too many boards, mistakenly believing they are carrying out their civic responsibility, doing their elected duty and saving the community tax dollars by doing the job themselves -- go to the bargaining table ill-equipped to compete in the contest.

As a matter of record, militant school boards which have insisted on operating independently of staff or professional advice have been beaten over and over again at the table.

The effect of a bad contract on the middle management of a school system can almost be as devastating as lack of control and/or instability among top executives. An article in last month's American School Board Journal vividly points this out (the article was entitled: "The brewing - and perhaps still preventable revolt of the school principals"): "Our school board has nobody but themselves to blame for the mess we're in," declared one rural Delaware high school principal. "They've bargained away everything but the chalkboards to the teacher negotiators. We now have a contract that says teachers can teach only five out of seven periods."[8] Another Illinois principal is quoted as saying "I think the time is nearing for principals to let their superintendents and school boards stew in their own juices. They're giving away the store. Maybe we should go quietly along with everything they're giving the teachers' unions and let the schools go to hell."[9]

Future boards and administrations may find themselves unable to respond to community and student demands for improvement as they no longer retain needed management rights. They will no longer be running the schools; the union will be, and experience shows the effect will be to maintain what is - not what might be.

Not only does the structure of our present school board model certain flaws that cause disruption in the administration of our schools, but the actions of individual board members can create additional problems. Let us return to two examples of problems created by individual board members.

(1) Since running for an elected office is increasingly expensive and because teachers unions are increasingly powerful, we are beginning to se an extremely dangerous trend in the election of what must be called, the union candidate. That is the citizen who is often ambitious for higher office and is beginning his or her career on the school board. To get elected, he accepts from the

union large campaign donations, reportedly as high as $25,000 in a single union donation. Naturally, pro-union votes are expected from a member so elected. When the majority of a board has been elected through such contributions, the results at the bargaining table are obvious and disastrous. As a profession, we should give very serious thought to legislation that would either limit or eliminate union contributions to board candidates.

(2) How individual board members relate vis a vis the superintendent is another factor that contributes to an executive's effectiveness or ineffectiveness in office. Today's superintendent finds himself dealing with many publics, each of which has a particular bias toward the distribution of the educational services throughout the system. Faced with these competing philosophies and conflicts, the superintendent frequently must take positions which are unfavorable to one group or another. The natural inclination of such groups is to try to bypass the superintendent and get what it wants from individual board members. When board members allow this to happen-and they frequently do--it undercuts the superintendent's position. In too many cases,individual board members,eager to play hero to one group or another, make commitments which are either impossible to implement or conflict with the overall operation of the system, or worse, enable the individual board member to exploit the situation for personal gain. In that vein, I recommend to you the article titled "The Great Great Neck War" in this months issue of Phi Delta Kappa. It is a case study in itself of misguided, ambitious individual board members whose interference in the administration of that system apparently caused incredible disruption.

Many of the problems I have just enumerated are the result of legal powers and role definitions prescribed to boards of education by the states. School board powers fall chiefly into the realm of what is commonly called broad policy determination. The distinction between board policy determination and administration is frequently fuzzy in the minds of many school boards. And if school boards often do not understand their role, certainly the public doesn't. If we are to believe the Gallup Poll commissioned by the National School Board Association in 1974, the public needs as much protection from board incompetence as does the administration. Listen to these findings:

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of all U.S. adults -- and nearly half (48%) of public school parents cannot name a single thing their local school boards have done during the past year.

Fully one-third (34%) of all U.S. adults over the age of 18 have no opinion, either positive or negative, about their local school boards.

Worse yet, a disturbingly large 40% of the people have no idea how they got the school boards they have.[10]

This Gallup poll vividly demonstrates that school boards -- in general -- are an almost invisible form of government and, as Harold Webb puts it in his report on the poll, this is "not a healthy situation considering that school boards direct the nation's second largest enterprise after defense . . ."[11]

The role of lay leadership in our public school is well-entrenched, but I believe that the time has come to open the concept to scrutiny. The original idea of local school boards was to insure continuation of the democratic tradition, but in practice, it is not operating that way. A 10-15% voter turnout in school board elections is not at all uncommon. Members elected in those cases do not represent the general community! Furthermore, the electorate does not pay attention to the actions of members once they are elected. It is, as Webb says, an invisible form of government.

The most important function of a board should then be the hiring of the superintendent, delegating to him the power needed to run the schools so that all children can be served and evaluating his effectiveness. To this end, new state laws need to be enacted that strengthen the administrative role of the superintendent. He is presently in a "no win" situation -- politically visible, publicly accountable, but virtually powerless to institute needed reforms. In the absence of clearly defined board/superintendent roles, confusion results. Since our present model is confusing at best, perhaps the time has come for us to experiment with other models of school governance. Personally, I favor the trusteeship model -- a board of trustees such as the 6-man board of Virginia's leading educators who were appointed in 1963 to reopen Prince Edward County schools. They hired a superintendent -- Neil Sullivan -- and met but a few times each year to assess his work and the progress of the programs he established. Such a trusteeship model clearly defines roles and permits the administration to administer the schools; the trustees to oversee them. One nationally prominent superintendent vows he can predict the problems a fellow superintendent is having by the number of times per month the board meets. Frequently, National Trustee boards meet no more than four times a year for a day-long session. (No wonder non-public administrations accomplish so much.)

In a Bicentennial year,one expects to hear dramatic speeches about the need for revolution in our schools -- about the problems each of us face and how their solutions can be found only by redesigning society. I think the answers to our problems are a good deal closer to hand than that.

Notwithstanding the problems of finance, state lawmakers, the courts, and incompetent teaching -- there are two main reasons why our system of education has broken down -- one is the outmoded model by which we govern our schools (the board of education). The other is ineffective administration.

I have said that the high turnover rate of school superintendents contributes to that ineffectiveness by encouraging a status quo climate among the middle management that remains constant through the parade of new chief executives. I have also said that there is too much vulnerability at the top of the administrative ladder and too little farther down. We give too much of the wrong kind of protection to the troops through our practice of tenure and too little protection to our generals who are at the mercy of capricious board members or temararious boards.

Furthermore, I have suggested that the problem of ineffective leadership at the top is frequently the result of a mistaken understanding of the school board's role as policy maker and evaluator, not as a daily or weekly administrator. I have quoted research that strongly suggests that the concept of the school board as a cornerstone of democracy is largely a myth. The electorate knows very little about their boards, and judging from typical voter turnouts in board elections, they care even less.

Finally, I have emphasized the importance of adopting a management model to run our schools, namely the management team. But until superintendents are given the freedom to administer and school boards are restricted to hiring the superintendent, establishing policy and evaluating progress, management teams will not be able to operate effectively.

I close these remarks then with a call to action on the following fronts:

First, I propose that the AASA establish a Superintendents' Professional Rights and Responsibilities Committee. Such a committee would:

(a) Establish fact-finding committees composed of AASA members. The committees would be empowered to investigate upon invitation the complaints of beleaguered superintendents and to recommend remedial or legal action and, if justified, publicly censure the offending board;

(b) Establish a legal defense fund for chief executives faced with court action by a dissident board and demand that due process be followed, and that release be accomplished in a non-degrading manner, including full salary and fringe benefit settlements.

(c) Establish suggested evaluation procedures and criteria by which boards could assess the effectiveness of their chief executive and other top management officials; thus providing a standard professionally-approved procedure that could protect superintendents from arbitrary action.

In private industry, top management receives top salaries to attract the best people to these vulnerable positions. When they fail to produce or lose the confidence of their board of directors, they go. So it should be in public education. Salaries, fringe benefits, retirement plans should be upgraded to reflect the vulnerable position of the superintendent. This action alone would help stabilize the position of superintendent as it would be costly for a board to act in the temerarious manner we see today.

Third, I call for improved state legislation that carefully defines the roles of boards as policy-setters and superintendents as administrators. Among the specifics of such role clarifications must be the superintendent's right to override the board in matters of hiring and firing his administrative staff. Legislation should also be supported which substitutes contracts for tenure, both for teachers and administrators. These are essential tools of administering without which a superintendent simply cannot build his team. When roles are more precisely defined through state legislation, boards will be asking questions such as "Why aren't the children achieving better?" instead of what is more frequently heard today -- "Why are you firing this custodian"? The former is a matter of policy; the latter a matter for the administration.

Finally, I urge the experimentation with other models of school governance. I suggested the trusteeship model as previously noted should be tested for its effectiveness, but there must be other, yet untried, models that could improve upon our current model. We must be willing to slay the sacred cows.

No, I don't agree with the would-be third baseman -- I don't see the position of school superintendent as unplayable. It is merely one that clearly needs strengthening so that we can be more effective in our jobs and thereby create schools that work.

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